

Howard Shelley and the CPO: 3 November 2016

Deon Irish

10 November 2016

SYMPHONY CONCERT, Thurs 3rd, City Hall; CPO with Howard Shelley; MOZART: Symphony No 35 in D, K.385 ("Haffner"); Piano Concerto No 18 in E flat, K.456 ("Paradis"); Piano Concerto No 20 in D minor, K.466.

THIS was the annual gala concert presented by the Friends of Orchestral Music and featuring the notable British pianist Howard Shelley as conductor and soloist.

The all-Mozart programme was an ideal vehicle for a display of Shelley's talents as conductor and soloist, being an acknowledged specialist in the music of the Classical and early Romantic periods with an approach to the scores informed both by scholarship and musical experience.

We commenced, perhaps slightly unusually, with the ebullient "Haffner" symphony, a work which had a rather haphazard genesis but, in its final form, has proved to be one of the composer's best-loved symphonies.

It was originally written as an occasional serenade in almost impossible circumstances: Die Entführung aus dem Seraglio had just opened and Mozart was desperately arranging it for wind ensembles before (in those copyright-less days) others could do so and reap the financial benefits; he was preparing for his marriage to Constanze in less than two weeks' time; and he already had another commission for a wind serenade to complete. In the midst of this, his father urgently requested a new piece to celebrate the granting of a title to a family friend, the "Haffner" of the sobriquet.

By working through the succeeding days and much of the nights, Mozart was able to complete his other tasks and also finalize this requested serenade just three days after his wedding. The piece then resurfaced some seven months' later, when he revisited the score and revised it into final form as a symphony, dropping the flanking marches and one of the minuets, and enriching the opening and final movements with flutes and clarinets.

Shelley led the orchestra in a grateful account of the work, the nicely scaled string orchestra delivering the passage work with pleasing efficiency and the winds providing a stylishly cohesive ensemble. Yet, for all the opening movement's dramatic flourish and urgency, it was the gentle Andante that caught the ear with a finely judged unhurried tempo (which avoided the risk of the second theme sounding faintly hysterical), and lovely oboe and bassoon contributions.

The final Presto also pleased, its obvious derivation from the celebrated Osmin aria in Seraglio, "Ha, wie will ich triumphieren" being clearly if not slavishly conveyed.

There followed the first of the concertos performed during the concert: the delightful eighteenth piano concerto in E flat of 1784, nicknamed "Paradis" after Maria Theresia von Paradis, the blind Viennese pianist and composer for whom it was written and who was to use it on her upcoming concert tour to Paris.

It is a work of considerable brilliance and virtuosity, which evoked a cry of "Bravo, Mozart" from the Emperor himself when the composer himself performed it in February of the succeeding year. Mozart's usually critical father, Leopold, who was present, was moved to tears.

He might well have experienced similar emotions for this lovely account. The movement opens with a little fanfare motif, the rhythm of which seem to have captivated the composer since he replicated it precisely in the opening bar of his next concerto, in F major. Once again, despite the effortless and elegant account of the outer movements, with their distinguishing use of modulation and chromaticism, it was the central Andante in the relative minor key that intrigued: a gracious set of variations on an alluringly simple theme. Here Shelley brought all of his musical and historical understanding to bear in an account that seemed faithfully recreative of 18th century intentions, even if not performed on historically authentic instruments.

After interval we heard the undoubted highpoint of the evening, a reading of a concerto that is often deemed Beethovenesque in its technical and emotional demands. Shelley, however, gave a master class in the considered and careful delineation between the truly Mozartean and what are later compositional developments, a salutary warning against a sort of musical anthropomorphism.

The passage which most exemplified this was again to be found in the central movement, a limpid "Romanze" which provides cool relief from the syncopated anxieties of the opening movement; that is, until the agitated G minor central episode, which tempts many performers into an all-out display of Beethovenesque bravura.

Shelley certainly gave display aplenty: glittering chains of broken chords and strings of urgent arpeggios that enclosed fragmented phrases that were part melodic, part accompanimental in form and effect.

But all of this never lost its presence in the 18th century, remaining abidingly elegant even whilst quickening the pulse. It was not the loudest episode in the performance; nor the quickest; nor the busiest: but, by adding just sufficient Don Giovanni-like D minor emotion into the musical mix, Shelley gave both a portrait of a musical age and a prophecy of its future. To echo the Emperor: "Bravo!"

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